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Fostering Knowledge Exchange through Collaboration and Participation: The Edinburgh Executive Sessions

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Building an infrastructure for knowledge exchange between police practitioners and researchers is increasingly recognized as a crucial step in fostering evidence-based policing practice around the world (Fyfe, 2012). Toward this goal in 2010, the police service in Scotland and the Scottish Institute for Policing Research (SIPR) partnered to develop just such an infrastructure. Modeled on the Harvard Executive Sessions, the Edinburgh Executive Sessions (EES) aim to produce academically rigorous and operationally sound papers that will have the potential to inform, influence, and challenge the next generation of police leaders.

The sessions' goal is to identify those big, intransigent problems that can beset police organizations year upon year and by pairing experienced practitioners with academics who have relevant research expertise develop informed, critical, and constructive debate around them, with a view to formulating evidenced initiatives and solutions in the long term. We introduce EES here as an example of building structured partnerships between police and researchers that are based on collaboration, highlighting one topic of the sessions' inquiry—turning a preventive approach into an operational reality—to illustrate the potential and some of the challenges facing the development of EES.

Moving from Knowledge Exchange to Collaboration: Developing Executive Sessions

In the early 1980s, Harvard University held the first Executive Session on Policing in the United States. The papers produced by the session were highly influential in the United States and internationally, especially concerning such issues as community policing, fear of crime, and leadership and management within policing. Having

observed a meeting of the second executive session in 2009, John Hawkins initiated a number of conversations among interested parties in Scotland, including the authors of this paper, with a view to introducing EES.

We felt that such collaboration could build on an already existing culture of collaboration and exchange within the evidence-based tradition. The police in Scotland have a good history of working closely with academia. In particular, the creation of SIPR in 2007 laid important groundwork for building the session. SIPR, a strategic collaboration between Scotland's universities and the Association of Chief Police Officers in Scotland (ACPOS) is supported by ACPOS, the Scottish Funding Council, and the participating universities.

SIPR has four main aims:

- To undertake high-quality independent research relevant to policing in Scotland.
- To engage in knowledge exchange activities to strengthen the evidence base on which policing policy and practice are developed.
- To provide a single focus for policing research in Scotland to foster national and international links with other researchers, policy makers, and practitioners.
- To enhance policing research capacity in Scotland by developing research skills and the research infrastructure.

A significant achievement of SIPR has been its development of routine engagement and interaction between research providers and research users, and the creation of research champions at the most senior levels within the Scottish police service. One such achievement was the successful creation of a police research seminar series, the Edinburgh Police Research and Practice Group, hosted at the headquarters of a local police force and co-organized by academics who were working on a knowledge exchange project on community policing with the organization (Henry and Mackenzie, 2012). A key insight from this work and the literature on the challenges of using evidence to shape professional practice was that seminar dissemination of research findings played at best a limited role in this venture but was useful in bringing together academics and practitioners and building ongoing connections between them (Henry and Mackenzie, 2012; Nutley, Walter, and Davies, 2007). EES was envisaged as being about building on these relationships, seeking to deepen the level of interaction and collaboration between police officers and academics.

The first EES took place in June 2012, supported by SIPR, the School of Law at the University of Edinburgh, and representatives



From left to right: John Hawkins, Nick Fyfe, Alistair Henry, and Bill Skelly

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of police services throughout Scotland. This meeting introduced what will be a series of working sessions across the next two years. About 10 senior police officers and 10 academics from across Scotland attended, along with a number of police officers from elsewhere in Europe, internationally recognized academics, and officials from other public service agencies whose interests in policing are not necessarily identical to those of the police—the aim being to expose all participants to perspectives and expertise that might challenge their assumptions. Three main themes were identified for study and EES papers: a new model of public sector leadership, the policing implications of social media, and the development of the practical application of a preventive approach. Here we focus on the third topic, prevention, to explore some of the contexts, drivers, aspirations, and potential challenges of developing EES.

Operationalizing Prevention in a Time of Transformation and Austerity

In thinking about prevention as a theme for EES, two key contextual points should be noted from the outset. On the one hand, Scottish policing is currently experiencing the most substantial organizational transformation of a generation. Where public policing in Scotland is provided through eight relatively autonomous police services (Donnelly and Scott, 2005), it will by April 2013 be serviced by a single national police organization (Fyfe and Henry, forthcoming). This change has the potential to enhance EES capacity to promote evidence-based policy development throughout Scotland as a whole (not just in individual local police services), as long as it continues

to be successful in obtaining the enthusiastic participation of senior officers throughout the national infrastructure. On the other hand, a key driver behind the creation of a national Police Service for Scotland, and the second no-less important contextual point to be noted, has been the difficult post-2008 economic climate that has, in Scotland, placed an inescapable pressure on public services now and in the future to deliver services for less money. The Christie Commission *Report on the Future Delivery of Public Services* (2011), which has been very influential and wholly adopted by the Scottish government, made a number of recommendations for change emphasizing the need for public services to work differently. At its core was the argument that a fundamental shift from reactive services to preventive services was essential to reduce significant waste in the public sector.

The report noted that despite a series of Scottish government initiatives and significant growth in public spending in recent years, inequalities have remained unchanged or have become more pronounced on most key social and economic measures. The Christie Report argued that a cycle of deprivation and low aspiration has been allowed to persist because preventive measures have not been prioritized. It is estimated that as much as 40 percent of all spending on public services is accounted for by interventions that could have been avoided by taking a preventive approach. The report concluded that tackling these fundamental inequalities and focusing resources on prevention must be a key objective of all public service reform.

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John Hawkins and Nick Fyfe

The commission's recommendations thus raised a number of serious challenges for the Scottish police, not the least of which are, what do we actually mean by "prevention," and how do we deliver it? It is in this context that prevention was quickly identified as a theme that could benefit from an EES. This critical conversation would engage police perspectives and experiences on the issue (including the all-important question of how to operationalize a preventive focus) with the complex research evidence that, among other things, problematizes prevention, unpacks different models of it, emphasizes the importance of specificity in relation to preventive mechanisms, and sets out the challenges inherent in evaluating preventive interventions or strategies (Crawford, 1998; Pawson and Tilley, 1997).

Interest in prevention in its various forms is not new within Scottish police services. Often, with partner agency involvement, the police have explored and implemented a range of measures at strategic and operational levels, including partnership working, community policing and engagement, and intelligence-led policing and crime analysis (Donnelly, 2008; Mackenzie and Henry, 2009). All of these embrace a general commitment to prevention. However, a challenge facing the EES in this period in which a preventive focus of public services is being robustly driven by the Christie Commission is to identify a meaningful focus that will give deliberations purchase on the operational practice it aspires to inform.

To this end, an emerging focus of the EES has been on the everyday work of officers on the street and their interactions with members of the public. Over the past decade, many Scottish police services have sought to provide more targeted police patrol, in part facilitated through the rolling out of personal digital assistants (PDAs), which are issued to all operational staff, replacing notebooks and pens. This technology creates an interface between the officer on the street, station staff and police leaders who can issue priorities and targets through the PDA, and members of the public, whose interactions with the police can be recorded and fed back into the intelligence system. Police leaders are interested in the preventive potential of this relatively simple technological development in operational

policing. The device creates possibilities for targeting and directing police services on the basis of information and intelligence.

From an academic perspective, there are a number of bodies of research that might allow for critical and constructive analysis of this attempt to embed preventive thinking within everyday police work. Procedural justice perspectives, for example, emphasize how fair and respectful (even where authority is deployed) encounters can not only have positive effects on measurable levels of public confidence in the police, but can also improve general respect for, and compliance with, the law (Bradford, Jackson, and Stanko, 2009). Refining the use of technologies, such as PDAs, through engagement with procedural justice perspectives is just one example of how EES aspires to connect practical and operational ideas and prescriptions with theoretical ideas and empirical evidence. Ensuring that such conversations are robust and have the potential to influence practice are the key challenges facing EES over the next year. We still have much to learn from one another and the wider academic and practitioner communities around the world. In that spirit, we'd be happy to hear from you.

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